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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that classroom collaboration has the potential to build a classroom learning community in which students turn to each other as resources and the teacher becomes one channel, among many, for learning. The demands that collaborative work places on students are examined, and the process of building a collaborative environment is explored, focusing on techniques that enhance learner awareness of the value of cooperation and promote sharing of knowledge and skills. The specific context addressed here is the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom. An example of a traditional classroom practice that has been adapted to encourage empathy among participants and decrease teacher-dependence is presented. In this classroom exchange, four characteristics are noted: (1) respect for the speaker; (2) empathy for fellow classmates, with all participants invested in validating or correcting their hypotheses by observing peer efforts; (3) focus on learning at the point of need or discrepancy in understanding; and (4) students' recognition and use of one another as resources. Using the last 10 minutes of a class period for student response to the day's work is also recommended as effective in orchestrating community dialogue. (MSE)

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The Collaborative ESL Classroom: Perspectives and Techniques

By Alice Savage

Abstract

This short article examines collaboration in terms of its potential to build a learning community in which the students turn to one another as resources, and the teacher becomes one channel for learning among many. The author looks at the demands that such collaboration makes on students and then focuses on the process of building a collaborative environment through examining techniques that enhance learner awareness of the value of collaboration and promote the sharing of knowledge and skills.

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The Collaborative ESL Classroom: Perspectives and Techniques

By Alice Savage

(This paper was originally presented at the Texas Junior College Teachers' Association, Houston, Texas, February 24, 1996)

What does a collaborative classroom look like? For many ESL professionals, the image of small groups of students working together comes to mind. The teacher is walking among the groups observing, fielding questions and providing assistance if needed. On closer inspection, it seems that a shift in responsibility has taken place. The students are mainly deciding how much they will use the teacher and when. Many of them are not turning to the teacher at all. Is this possible? Such a situation does not usually arise spontaneously, especially given the language-learning experiences that many ESL students bring with them, their notions of who the keeper of the knowledge is, and the obstacles of culture and language that separate them. It is more likely that this scenario is the culmination of a long process in which all classroom participants have worked to transform traditional notions of the student-teacher relationship and have built a learning community in which learning happens through a variety of channels, only one of which is the teacher.

A collaborative classroom, then, is more than just successful group work. A collaborative classroom, whether it is teacher-fronted, student-centered or

moving up and down the continuum between the two (as most classrooms do), has specific characteristics including empathy and understanding. But perhaps most importantly in terms of actual practice, a collaborative classroom is one where students consistantly recognize and use one another as resources.

Taking time out to train students to exploit the potential of a learning community has the distinct advantage of eventually creating breathing room for the beleagured teacher, but there are many advantages for the learner as well. When students become less dependent on the teacher and more able to work through questions on their own and with one another, they waste less time waiting for help; they are able to extend their learning beyond immediate objectives; they can share frustrations and insight with someone who truely empathizes; they can exercise critical thinking and problem solving skills, and individuals are not held to the same level of ability but are able to work at different challenges in concert.

The following is an example of a traditional classroom practice that has been adapted to encourage empathy among classroom participants while diminishing teacher-dependency. While it is effective at any stage in the ongoing development of a learning community, this whole class exercise is especially useful in laying the groundwork for collaboration because it provides learners with the additional security of feeling that the teacher is firmly in control even though they rely on one another in many ways. The outcome is that learners are able to reap the benefits of collaboration without having to assume the burden of initiative that most groupwork requires.

The room is arranged so that all students can see one another, and the teacher is one more participant among many. The task is a homework exercise in which students have to identify whether a sentence is correct or incorrect. The

teacher asks the students to raise their hands if they think the sentence is correct, if there is consensus, she moves on to the next one. The first several examples go by quickly because there is consensus around the right answer, but then students arrive at a sentence where class opinion is divided. There is some laughter as the students recognize the discrepancy among them, but there is also curiosity. Who is correct?

The teacher stops the exercise at this point and acknowledges their differing opinions, "Ah ha! Here is where there is something to work on." She then asks for a volunteer who thinks he knows but isn't quite sure. She explains her purpose, "If you are sure, then you already know, and you have nothing to learn. I want to work with someone who has a guess." (It may take time for students to adjust to this orientation, but the benefits are obvious, and if the climate is conducive to risk-taking, then students generally seize the opportunity to clarify an uncertainty.) The teacher then explains that no one may help the volunteer unless he asks for help by making a T sign with his hands. (The policy of putting the learner in control of the situation increases his comfort level while at the same time trains other students to listen rather than shout out the answer in a display of knowledge. The point is to focus class attention on what they need to know not on what they already know.)

When the rules have been established, and the volunteer has come forward, he may venture an explanation. If he is correct and the class is satisfied with his explanation, the exercise moves on. But if he is incorrect, there is still something for the teacher (and the class) to work with. The teacher proceeds to tell the student what he has correctly hypothesized, but stops short of giving the answer where he missed. Instead she gives hints and strategies that lead the student to discovering the correction himself. Such hints include, "There is something missing in the sentence. What do you think it is? Do you think it is a

word or part of a word?" Or, "You have all the right words, but they are in the wrong place. Can you change the word order? The student can escape anytime *by calling upon his peers*, but more often than not, he will attempt to work through the problem as far as he can go. When he gets it, there is a sense of achievement because he has, in a sense, discovered it himself. The activity continues with new volunteers working on questions that the whole class is invested in understanding. All the teacher's efforts are focused on drawing out the answers from individual students and their peers. She provides structure and keeps things moving forward, but the students exercise nearly all of the initiative.

In the above scenario, the teacher has put the following four criteria at the forefront of classroom practice: 1) There is respect for the speaker; no one may intervene unless called upon by the volunteer. 2) There is empathy for fellow classmates; all participants are invested in validating or correcting their hypotheses by observing the efforts of a peer. 3) There is a focus on learning at the point of need; the teacher has identified an area where there is a discrepency in understanding. 4) Students recognize and use one another as resources; the teacher will only give the answer after all other avenues have been exhausted.

Just as with any shared classroom experience, the simple homework activity can now be mined for what it reveals about collaboration. One way to do this is through feedback in which a teacher follows up an activity with a set of questions designed to get students to reflect on their classroom practice. There are several feedback methods available including written and oral, but more important than the method is the reasoning behind it. Because feedback is often a new experience for students, the teacher's intention can be misinterpreted, "Is she asking me to tell her how to teach?" for example, as opposed to, "What *did* I learn in class today? Hmm. *How* did I learn it? What does that tell me about my

learning?" Therefore, it is essential that the teacher be very clear about her purpose and choose her method and questions appropriately. With this in mind, a teacher promoting collaboration will choose a feedback method that encourages students to share ideas with one another about what they did rather than one in which individual students are in a two-way dialog with the teacher about what *the teacher* did.

One of the most effective ways to orchestrate this community dialog is to take the last ten minutes of class for a feedback circle in which students respond to the day's work. The teacher initiates the conversation with concrete questions that are easily answered such as, "What did you do today? What did you practice? What were you working on?" and leads up to more reflective questions such as, "Do you think it was useful? How? Why? Why do you think I had you do that? What purpose does it serve? How did working with a partner help you?" Students are free to answer however they like. The teacher doesn't interfere except to keep the dialog from getting sidetracked. She retains the option of steering the dialog in specific directions through her choice of questions, but she refrains from providing answers that students can provide for each other. In this way, students are encouraged to listen closely to each other and to value their contributions as serving the needs of the community rather than "showing off."

A useful example for looking at ways in which a follow up oral feedback circle can serve the process of collaboration concerns peer response in a writing class. An issue that frequently arises is a reader who expresses difficulty with the peer response procedure because he doesn't know what to say to the writer about her composition. The reader's classmates in the circle can respond to his dilemma by sharing the ways that they became engaged with the ideas that they read about or questions they asked that sparked dialog. If that fails, the teacher

can jump start the discussion by asking the writers who found their partner's comments useful to speak up and explain what their reader did that helped them.

In conclusion, there is more to the collaborative classroom than group work activities. In order to be able to seize the initiative that group work demands, it is often necessary for ESL students to transform their view of the potential contribution that they and their classmates can make to the collective body of knowledge; then, they must develop collaborative skills to put that awareness into practice. Teachers can facilitate this shift in both thinking and practice by implementing collaborative criteria in whole class activities and by following up collaborative experiences with feedback sessions that encourage shared reflection on the benefits of the learning community.

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END

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